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ABSTRACT

Resilience is a universal capacity that allows a child to prevent, minimize, or overcome the damaging effects of adversity. The construct of resiliency, the combination of protective factors that result in resilience, was addressed by the International Resilience Project (IRP), which set out to explore what parents, caregivers, teachers or children can do that seems to promote resilience in children. Protective factors noted include the dispositional attributes of the individual, family attributes, and school and community environment. The IRP determined that children overcome adversity by drawing on three sources of resilience, labeled "I have," "I am," "I can." To test these resilience features, 39 children in a Singapore primary school were given an adapted version of the Child's Perception of Resilience Checklist, as used in the IRP. The study determined that it is possible to draw a common set of resilience factors in a particular cultural setting to promote resilience in children, and that a number of strong resilience factors were shown; however, while the children do use resilience-promoting behaviors, these depend largely on the individual situation. The results reinforce the role of family and school as protective factors for the developing child. (JPB)

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# DEVELOPING RESILIENCY IN YOUNG CHILDREN

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DEVELOPING RESILIENCY IN YOUNG CHILDREN

Abstract

Resilience is a universal capacity which allows a child to prevent, minimize or overcome the damaging effects of adversity. Researchers and practitioners are aware that fewer than half of the adults caring for children promote resilience in them . Findings from international studies have indicated specific factors critical in the process of building up resilience but there is a lack of consensus of how these factors interact with each other in different cultural contexts. This paper discusses some understanding of the combination of protective factors that result in resilience in children. There will be some reference to the data from the International Resilience Project which set out to explore what parents, caregivers, teachers or children can do that seems to promote resilience. Findings and implications from a survey of a group of children's perception of resilience in a Singapore school setting will be included.

# DEVELOPING RESILIENCY IN YOUNG CHILDREN

Traditionally, the area of childhood emotional problems and stresses has been a central research topic. Over the last five or so years, a number of research meetings have drawn attention to the concept of resilience in vulnerable children. ( Grotberg 1993; 1994: Hiew & Cormier 1994: Gordon & Song 1994). The concept of resilience is not a new one, although defining it is not so easy. Empirical evidence have identified specific factors such as social, familial and academic interactions to be critical in the process of building up resilience, (Ainsworth 1989) but there is a lack of understanding how these factors interact with each other in different contexts. Edith Grotberg (1995) defines resilience as a "universal capacity which allows a person, group or community to prevent, minimize or overcome the damaging effects of adversity". A child's individual genetic make-up and temperament are fundamental to whether he or she will be resilient.

The first part of this paper is to gain some understanding of the combination of protective factors that result in resilience in children. There will some reference to examining the construct of resiliency as addressed by the International Resilience Project which set out to explore what parents, caregivers, teachers or children can do that seems to promote resilience in children. Findings and implications from a survey of a group of children's perception of resilience in a Singapore primary school setting will be included.

## Protective Factors

An array of factors have been identified as having important roles in developing resilience in children and adolescents. Often echoed by other researchers, Werner (1989) clustered protective factors into the following major categories:

1) dispositional attributes of the individual
2) affectional ties within the family and
3) existence of external support systems which arise at school or within the community.

Each of these categories has been outlined recently by Smokowski (1997).

### Individual Attributes:

The resilient child has been globally described as one who "works well, plays well, loves well and expects well" (Werner & Smith, 1982). Personal attributes which have been cited as differentiating resilient children from their vulnerable peers include (a) higher economic status (b) being female (before adolescence) and male (after adolescence) (c)

the absence of organic deficits (d) easy temperament (e) absence of early separation or losses (f) increased responsiveness, flexibility and adaptability relative to peers (g) an internal locus of control (h) having a sense of humor to generate comic relief, reduce stress and find alternative ways of looking at things (i) good intellectual skills (j) religious faith and (k) good fortune. Additionally, resilient children have also been found to display social competence, problem solving skills and a strong sense of purpose and future.

Family Attributes:
Previous resiliency research has found that the social relationships among family members to be by far the best predictors of behavioural outcomes in children. This is reiterated by Werner and Smith (1982) who found caregiving in the child's first year of life to be the most powerful predictor of childhood resiliency. This affectionate bond continues further throughout childhood and adolescence. Warmth without severe criticism has been noted as having a substantial protective effect. In Rutter's study (1989) of troubled families, three quarters of children who did not have a good relationship with one parent displayed conduct disorders compared to only one quarter of those who had a good relationship. The strong impact of caring, support and affection from one or more adults is critical in abating the effects of risk and stressful events on healthy child and adolescent development.

School Environment:
Protective factors in the school environment are closely related to those within a resilient family setting. Werner (1990) discovered that, outside the family, favourite teachers play a positive role model in the lives of children. They not only facilitate the children's academic growth but also become their confidants and this enhances resiliency in their emotional development. Rutter (1989) observed that after tracking down a sample of ten year old children through secondary school, substantial differences emerged between the children who come from successful or unsuccessful school environments. In the successful ones, problem behaviours by youths decreased over time while they increased over time in the unsuccessful schools. Successful schools shared many of the same factors which fostered resiliency within the family eg academic focus, clear expectations and regulations, high level of student participation, a variety of stimulating resources to draw from and caring personnel.

Community, Friends and Neighbourhood:
Negative factors which work against the building up of resiliency include significant social problems such as teen pregnancy, alcohol, drug and child abuse. Fragmentation of community life, breaking bonds among families, schools and social systems all serve as risk factors and these had come about as a result of the destruction of naturally occurring social networks within the community. It is now becoming a major focus for communities to weave a broad and strong protective umbrella for all children, adolescents and families through community-building and inter-network collaboration.

## THE INTERNATIONAL RESILIENCE PROJECT

Since 1994, a number of international meetings have gathered to address the concept of resilience and to help children develop it in their overall growth over time. The International Resilience Project was launched with an Advisory Committee made up of several international organisations to examine what countries can do to promote resilience in their children. Participants from 30 countries have joined the project and this international perspective helps us to learn what different cultures are doing to enhance resilience : Do they draw on the same pool of resilience factors? Do they vary in some factors which are combined to address adversity?

A total of 589 children as well as their families and care givers took part in the study. 48% were girls and 52 % were boys. Just over half the children were aged from 9 to 11 years, and the remainder were aged six years or under. According to Grotberg (1995) the children in the project were not studied independently from their settings. In promoting resilience, any work with children must take into account the contexts of their families, their schools, their communities, and the larger society. Hence, the basic unit for the international study is the child in his/her different cultural context .

A very general aim of the project is to improve opportunities for young children living in disadvantaged circumstances but as noted in the guide ( Grotberg 1995) almost every day , children all over the world face stressful situations such as divorce or illness while others confront catastrophe - war, poverty, disease, famine, floods. Whether such experiences crush or strengthen an individual child depends, in part, on his or her resilience.

"Resilience is important because it is the human capacity to face, to overcome and be strengthened by or even transformed by the adversities of life. Everyone faces adversities; no one is exempt. With resilience, children can triumph over trauma; without it, trauma (adversity) triumphs. The crises children face both from within their families and in their communities can overwhelm them. While outside help is essential in times of trouble, it is insufficient. Along with food and shelter, children need love and trust, hope and autonomy. Along with safe havens, they need safe relationships that can foster friendships and commitment. They need the loving support and self-confidence, the faith in themselves and their world, all of which builds resilience". (pg 10 Grotberg 1995).

Resilience is therefore a basic human capacity, inherent in all children who need it to face many common - and some not so common -crises. When the International Resilience Project asked children and their parents around the world what adversities they had experienced, the answers were numerous. Difficulties experienced within the family included the following:

death of parents or grandparents, divorce, separation, illness of parents or siblings, poverty, moving family or friends, accident causing personal injuries, abuse including sexual abuse, abandonment, suicide, remarraige, homelessness, poor health and hospitalisation, fires causing personal injury, disabled family member, parent's loss of a job or income and murder of a family member.

In addition, children and their parents reported facing the following adversities outside the home:
robberies, war, fire, earthquake, flood, car accident, adverse economic conditions, illegal, refugee status, migrant status, property damage from storms, floods, cold, political detention, famine, abuse by a non-relative, murders in neighbourhood, unstable government and drought.

Three Sources of Resilience

According to the project, children facing such situations often feel lonely, fearful, and vulnerable. These feelings are less overwhelming for children who have the skills, attitudes, beliefs and resources of resilience. To overcome adversities, children draw from three sources of resilience features labelled : I HAVE, I AM, I CAN. What they draw from each of the three sources may be described as follows : ( pg 11 Grotberg 1995)

I HAVE
- people around me I trust and who love me, no matter what
- people who set limits for me so I know when to stop before there is danger or trouble
- people who show me how to do things right by the way they do things
- people who want me to learn to do things on my own
- people who help me when I am sick, in danger or need to learn

I AM
- a person people can like and love
- glad to do nice things for others and show my concern
- respectful of myself and others
- willing to be responsible for what I do
- sure things will be all right

I CAN
- talk to others about things that frighten me or bother me
- find ways to solve problems that I face
- control myself when I feel like doing something not right or dangerous
- figure out when it is a good time to talk to someone or to take action
- find someone to help me when I need it

A resilient child does not need all of these features to be resilient, but one is not enough. A child may be loved (I HAVE), but if he or she has no inner strength (I AM) or social,

interpersonal skills (I CAN), there can be no resilience. A child may be very verbal and speak well (I CAN), but if he or she has no empathy (I AM) or does not learn from role models (I HAVE), there is no resilience. Resilience results from a combination of these features.

These features of resilience may seem obvious and easy to acquire; but they are not according to Goteberg. In fact, many children are not resilient and many parents and other care givers do not help children become resilient. Only about 38% of the thousands of responses in the International Resilience Project indicate that resilience is being promoted. That is a very small percentage for such a powerful contribution to the development of children. Goteberg believes that too many adults crush or impede resilience in children or give mixed messages, and too many children feel helpless, sad and not fully loved. This is more the result of many adults not knowing enough about resilience or how to promote it in children.

## The Singapore Setting

A small sample of 39 children in a primary school were given an adapted version of the Child's Perception of Resilience Checklist as used in the International Resilience Project There were 27 boys and 12 girls (ages 10 to 11) mainly Chinese (33) who responded to the survey. The following is a tabular summary of the results:

| | | YES | NO |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1.Is there someone who is very important to you? | Males | 24(88%) | 3 |
| | Females | 12(100%) | 0 |
| 2 Do you know someone you want to be like? | Males | 15(55%) | 11 |
| | Females | 9(75%) | 3 |
| 3 Do you have someone who loves you? | Males | 23(85%) | 4 |
| | Females | 12(100%) | 0 |
| 4 Do you tell your problems to anybody? | Males | 24(88%) | 3 |
| | Females | 11(92%) | 1 |
| 5 Are you praised for doing things on your own? | Males | 18(67%) | 9 |
| | Females | 8(67%) | 4 |
| 6 Are you happy being who you are today? | Males | 22(82%) | 5 |
| | Females | 11(92%) | 1 |
| 7 Are you willing to try new things? | Males | 24(88%) | 1 |
| | Females | 11(92%) | 1 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 8 Do you like to do better in what you are doing? | Males | 23(85%) | 0 |
| | Females | 12(100%) | 0 |
| 9 Do you like yourself? | Males | 23(85%) | 4 |
| | Females | 10(83%) | 1 |

Based on the above figures , the following observations are made:

1 All the girls (100%) have someone who are very important to them and who love them and all of them also like to do better in what they are doing.

2 More girls than boys tell their problems to somebody (88%), are happy who they are (92%) are willing to try new things (92%) and know someone they want to be like (75%).

3 Same percentage of girls and boys (67%) are praised for doing things on their own.

4 Over 80% of the boys and girls like themselves.

5 The girls in the sample have a better and more positive perception of resilience. This is supported by recurring comments made in the open ended responses.
Eg
"I have a caring family who loves me and who is always there for me."
"I can try my best in whatever I can".
"I have a problem but I will seek help from my family".
"I am quite humorous and I have many friends"
"I have a high resistence"
"I have all that I want".
"I am a happy person".

6 The boys on the other hand provided statements like
"I am a pampered and independent child".
"I am forgetful".
"I am very sad because I think I would do badly ".
"I have very little confidence".
"I am very hot tempered".
"I have no time"
"I am very lonely".

7 In terms of emotional and social supports, the majority of both boys and girls mentioned very frequently the family and parents, reliance on concrete physical possessions (like toys ) and pets. Descriptions about themselves mainly refer to their physical features like height and weight, looking good and being an only child. There were several references being good in a few games and sports

8 On the whole, this sample shows a number of strong resilient factors . Mothers was mentioned many times as the key person who gave them love and trust and help them with their problems. The majority come from supportive family homes.

Developing Resilience in Children ( Summary)

The Singapore findings disclose that it is possible to draw a common set of resilience factors in a particular cultural setting to promote resilience in their children. The ten and eleven year olds have used different resilience promoting supports if they are compared with older children. Older cohorts would probably use more inner strengths and interpersonal skills in promoting resilience . Overall, the Singapore respondents are using resilience promoting behaviour but these depend very largely on the individual situation.

It is not possible to determine any significant cultural variations because the number of respondents is too small. However, it is clear that there are relationships between social - cultural and resilience factors eg some families rely more on fate and faith than on decision making in facing adversity, some parents expect children to be more dependent on them or others for help in adversity rather than becoming more independent and more self-reliant. In Singapore, there are generally more parents who are very concerned about their children's education and who maintain a close relationship with their children's academic achievement.

There are several suggestions that can be drawn from this small study. The instruments which were used by the International Resilience Project need to be adapted to the variety of cultural settings within each different country. These include the 15 situations of adversity to which adults and children were asked to respond and the checklist of 15 statements that indicate resilience in a child.

Resilience implies a qualitative evaluation of one's perception of how one adapts to an adverse situation. It is found that children can and do engage themselves in extensive self-assessment based upon their limited accumulation of life experiences. Environmental influences have been critical factors and using personal essays may be an unique qualitative way to focus on the specific risk or protective processes in the lives of these children. These essays can provide the children with a maximum amount of personal expression and at the same time offer the researcher an intimate window into the children's lives. It can enable us to piece together the salient processes these children

use in overcoming adversity. Information gathered from this qualitative, process oriented methodology may be an important supplement to the data from the checklist.

This analysis reinforces the roles of family and school as protective factors for the developing child. The sample may be more representative of children who are still in school than it is of those who have dropped out. A comparison between these two groups of children would further buttress the results reported here. However, it lends support to current resiliency research findings which stress family relationships, social support and personal motivation as important factors. It underscores the critical parts family members, teachers and community play in fostering the child's development. These protective factors are strongly associated with one another and positive relationships in one aspect of interpersonal functioning often generalised to other realms as well.

According to Smokowski (1997) even under the worst conditions, mothers , for instance, have an especially profound impact in engendering aspirations, motivations, future optimism and the importance of academic success in their children. Resilience in children in children can be garnered in a variety of ways including like finding positive role models and participating in worthwhile school activities that offer a sense of accomplishment .

This paper does not claim to know all there is to know about resilience in children. The construct of resilience and the factors that contribute to it continue to be discussed at conferences while research projects in different countries are using the concepts and findings to inform us of the range of knowledge and practice of how resilience can be promoted in children.

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